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ABSTRACT

Despite female participation in combat across time and geographical boundaries, the study of women in military history is a relatively new scholarly endeavor. Women have participated in all types of armed conflict, yet prominent military historians such as John Keegan dismiss their participation and categorize war as a completely masculine activity. World War II provides an interesting setting to study women and warfare because the belligerent countries mobilized millions of women for the war effort, both in civilian and military capacities. In the Soviet Union, hundreds of thousands of women took up arms and served in the Red Army. Conversely, in the United States, women entered military service but never served as front-line combatants. In addition, Soviet women entered the completely masculine world of combat aviation. Women served as aviators in the U.S. military as well, but the military establishment never sent them into combat and considered them civilians until decades after the war's conclusion.

A comparative analysis that discusses the recruitment of female pilots, the reason women served, their performance, and their mistreatment after the war can be instructive. This study will reveal the reasons for society's persistent use of traditional gender roles despite the actual demonstrated capabilities and

performance of women in military service, specifically aviation. Perhaps even more importantly, this study will provide insight into the situation women find themselves in the United States and Russian Air Forces today.

Military aviation was and is different. In the first place, it is not inherently defensive. Second, especially in the United States, pilot duty was the *crème* of the crop of military assignments. In both countries, women temporarily filled this traditionally masculine role, but near the end of the war, both military establishments unceremoniously forced almost all of these women from their wartime occupations. This comparative analysis will attempt to answer why, following the war, most military women became expendable.

SOVIET AND AMERICAN AIRWOMEN DURING WORLD WAR II:
A COMPARISON OF THEIR FORMATION,
TREATMENT AND DISMISSAL

by

Beth Ann Myers

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
The University of Utah
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of History
The University of Utah

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THE UNIVERSITY OF UTAH GRADUATE SCHOOL

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INTRODUCTION

Despite female participation in combat across time and geographical boundaries, the study of women in military history is a relatively new scholarly endeavor. Women have participated in all types of armed conflict, yet prominent military historians such as John Keegan dismiss their participation and categorize war as a completely masculine activity.¹ WW II provides an interesting setting to study women and warfare because the belligerent countries mobilized millions of women for the war effort, both in civilian and military capacities. In the Soviet Union, hundreds of thousands of women took up arms in the Red Army and many entered the completely masculine world of combat aviation. Despite the masculine character of the Red Air Force, Soviet women did fly combat missions, suffered casualties, and earned the admiration of their fellow soldiers. In the United States, women too entered military service yet never served as front-line combatants. Women did serve as aviators in the U.S. military, yet unlike in the Soviet military, the U.S. Army Air Corps never sent women into combat and considered them civilians until decades after the war's conclusion.

¹ John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 28.

Although the female aviators of both of these nations faced similarities in their mobilization, treatment and rapid dismissal from their services, many contrasts do exist. A comparative analysis that discusses attitudes about women in society and the military, the recruitment of female pilots, why the women served, their performance and their mistreatment after the war reveals insight about the experiences of these women. Despite the actual demonstrated capabilities and performance of women in military service, specifically aviation both American and Russian societies persisted in demanding traditional gender roles from these female pioneers. As the study will suggest, these once-held views still echo down to women presently serving in the air service of both nations today.

The ultimate goal of this study is a gendered analysis of the war. The women who served as aviators in WWII never embraced what some label as feminist views. They did pioneer new roles for their peers all in the name of winning the war. To this cause, these women dedicated their efforts and even their lives. For the most part, they wanted to serve and defend their countries and in addition, they loved to fly. The role of gender during wartime is an important subject. WWII altered the boundaries between the sexes and created possibilities rarely encountered by American and Soviet women.

Knowing these women faced similar circumstances, why then write a comparative history of their experiences? Oftentimes, the effectiveness of comparative history receives considerable scholarly debate. In specific cases,

comparison allows the historian to ask questions that might otherwise be overlooked or simply taken for granted. For example, many students of the war assume that both of these countries resorted to women fliers simply to relieve desperate manpower shortages or to free up men for combat assignments. By asking the right questions, a scholar can uncover more meaningful and accurate answers. Because the actual number of female aviators was quite small, they could hardly have made a dent in the manpower crisis that the belligerents faced. Further, in the Soviet Union, women actually flew in combat, so other answers must be forthcoming.

This study will follow D'Ann Campbell's comparative format used to analyze female air defense forces during WW II.² Campbell compares four warring nations in their willingness to bend gender norms in order to defend their homelands. Because the utilization of women in antiaircraft artillery (AAA) units during WWII became necessary only when a country was under attack, Campbell's comparisons are somewhat different. Air defense is an almost completely defensive activity as its name implies; unless deploying to a foreign land, air defense units are used only to protect one's own soil. As George H. Quester explains: "Given that such personnel would be involved in 'combat' only if senators and representatives were being bombed, this hardly would seem

² D'Ann Campbell, "Women in Combat: The World War II Experience in the United States, Great Britain, Germany and the Soviet Union," *Journal of Military History* 57 (April, 1993): 301-323.

like such a radical departure from the American way of life."³ More crudely, if a country were under attack, women and children were going to die anyway.

Regarding the British case, Campbell concludes: "A successful air defense was an even stronger political imperative than the possible moral and physical dangers to the daughters of the nation."⁴

Military aviation was and is different. In the first place, it is not inherently defensive. Second, especially in the United States, pilot duty was the crème of the crop of military assignments. In both countries, women temporarily filled this traditionally masculine role, but near the end of the war, both military establishments unceremoniously forced almost all of these women from their wartime occupations. After acknowledging the prewar attitudes in both of these countries and examining their WWII modifications, this comparative analysis will attempt to answer why, near the end of the war, these two nations summarily dismissed their female military aviators and hardly acknowledged their contributions to the successful war effort.

Several texts provide effective resources in addressing the nature of women's participation in WWII. In *Wings, Women and War: Soviet Airwomen in World War II Combat*, Reina Pennington chronicles the creation, organization, and

³ George H. Quester, "The Problem," in *Female Soldiers-Combatants or Noncombatants? Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* ed. Nancy Loring Goldman (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1982), 221.

⁴ Campbell, 313.

leadership of the three Soviet female aviation regiments created following the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. She incorporates both the words of veterans themselves as well as Soviet archives to detail the lives of these exceptional women. In *Clipped Wings: The Rise and Fall of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) of World War II*, Molly Merryman uncovers the attitudes toward women pilots, especially angry military men who saw women as competitors for male jobs. Each text provides ample evidence that both groups of women performed bravely and heroically, yet neither government recognized nor publicly appreciated the risks and sacrifices these women made.

The first chapter of this study will explore the notions and presumptions that surround women and war. The chapter will focus on attitudes toward women in both of the countries on the eve of and during WWII. This section will also address the exploitation women's labor during this time of crisis in the USSR and in the United States. In Soviet Russia, official ideology placed women as full participants in the workplace, a role greatly expanded during the near destruction of the USSR by the Germans. In the US, government and society alike argued that women belonged in the home. Yet, the war took a substantial number of men out of the workplace, replaced, in part, by women. Their large numbers presented the only viable solution to the labor shortages that would have appeared in the absence of so many men. Both societies ultimately decided to use women in their military forces, one in combat and the other only in rear

areas and on the home front. The subsequent chapters will detail the recruitment of the Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) and the three regiments of female aviators in the Soviet Union, these women's wartime experiences, and the fate they all faced near the war's conclusion. The final chapter will compare and contrast the way these two countries dismissed the women pilots at the end of WWII and conclude with the impact that their service had on the progress of female military aviation.

In order to accomplish this lofty task, one must fully detail the attitudes of the American and Soviet publics before, during, and after the war. Only by understanding these two cultures can one fully understand why women aviators found themselves unappreciated for the services they rendered. Since these attitudes, though, could realistically include hundreds of millions of people, this study must rest solely on the two governments, including their military leadership, the popular media, and the women who served in aviation. This study must also address the other, nonflying military women who went before the female aviators. Without their collective experiences, the door to the world of military aviation during WWII would have remained closed to women.

CHAPTER 1

GENDER'S ROLE IN WAR AND SOCIETY

A culturally produced activity that is as rigidly defined by sex differentiation and as committed to sexual exclusion as is war points to a crucial site where meanings about gender are being produced, reproduced and circulated back into society. After biological reproduction, war is perhaps the arena where division of labor along gender lines has been the most obvious, and thus where sexual difference has seemed the most absolute and natural. The separation of "front" and "home front" has not only been the consequence of war but has also been used as its justification. Arguably, this remains true despite the experiences of our own wartorn century, during which civilian bombing, wars of national liberation, civil wars, and genocide have challenged the distinctions between these fronts and the gender relations they enforce.⁵

Scholars wrote the preceding paragraph for the proposal for a ten-week institute on gender and war held at Dartmouth College in the spring of 1990. Although this thesis will not focus specifically on "front" and "home front," these academics raise an interesting point. Military service, like no other profession, has tried to exclude women from its ranks especially when combat is concerned. Many times this exclusion has not played out, and WW II with its

⁵ Miriam Cooke and Angela Woollacott, eds., *Gendering War Talk* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), X. The proposal was written by Lynda Boose, Lynn Higgins, Marianne Hirsch, Al La Valley, and Brenda Silver.

millions of women participants provides an excellent setting for this study.

The military histories of WWII, for the most part, have excluded the participation of women. Even though "Rosie the Riveter" was a popular national icon, Americans have largely forgotten her sisters in uniform. WWII mobilized entire nations and opened up new possibilities for women's participation in military service. Almost every able-bodied American contributed to the war effort. In the United States, women did, in fact, fill noncombatant roles in all three branches of the military, yet battle remained outside the scope of their duties. Surprisingly, the government refused to recognize the female pilots serving in the WASP program as service members until well after the war's conclusion.

In the Soviet Union, the war demanded the effort of every Soviet citizen regardless of sex, age, or race. The Soviet Union literally fought for its very survival. Their enemies, the brutal Germans, killed thirty million, mostly civilians, destroyed families, and left countless orphans. At its peak, Germany controlled approximately a third of Soviet territory. Desperate, the Soviets proved gender blind in their drive to enlist every citizen. Soviet women accounted for approximately 8 percent of the entire Red Army. Almost a million women served officially in uniform and countless others served in partisan and

resistance movements.⁶

The start of this chapter explores terms associated with war and the ways in which gender roles developed to exclude women from combat. Some feminist scholars argue that gendered war roles simply result from male domination or a woman's instinctive need to nurture, yet human encounters, especially those involving war, are more complicated than any single theory can describe. Other scholars point out that governments exploit women's productive capacities to help sustain war. Women act as essential players on the home front while remaining absent from the battlefield.

Key Concepts and Theories

This study uses several notions to explain the recruitment and participation of women in war. War demands a working definition of combatant, especially since women rarely serve on battlefields in an organized, institutional arena. In many times, places, and desperate situations women have taken up arms to defend themselves and especially to protect their children. In this study, combatants operated under the supervision of a government, which had recruited, trained, and armed their personnel. These enlistees bore arms on the field of battle under the discipline and or at least under the control of the military organizations that made up the defense forces of both regimes. In sum,

⁶ Reina Pennington, *Wings. Women and War: Soviet Airwomen in World War II Combat* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2001), 1.

combatant includes just soldiers, not resistance fighters or partisans. This definition excludes those fighting for self-defense in emergency situations. Based on this definition, hundreds of thousands of women engaged in combat during WWII. They served on both sides and in every theater of operation. Almost a million Soviet women fought on the front lines and faced combat over the course of the entire war. American women never served on the battlefield as combatants.

One obvious reason for this may be the proximity of the fighting. Although both the United States and the Soviet Union entered the war in the same year, the similarities stop there. The American military fought its enemies on battlefields far from its homeland, and the threat of total war was much less in the United States than in the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union proved the most grisly scene of the war and hosted the war's most gruesome fighting. The Americans endured the hardships associated with war; the Soviets confronted annihilation. WWII subsequently became the Great Patriotic War fought to save Mother Russia. Unlike the United States, the Soviet government could not afford the luxury of women's auxiliaries. For the Soviet people, the "front" and the "home front" became one in the same. Proximity of fighting remains just one distinguishing difference between the United States and the Soviet Union.⁷ The

⁷ Campbell emphasizes this in her study on women's AAA units. The Germans only reluctantly allowed women to serve and limited their participation even during the most desperate stages of the war.

following chapters will explore other differences as well.

Why has combat so often excluded women, despite its inevitableness across all time and cultures? Exceptions have occurred, yet only in desperate conditions when the very survival of a state or nation is at stake. In one exploration of this gendered notion of war, *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa*, Joshua Goldstein argues that although the potential for war has appeared in all human societies, the potential for killing remains uncommon for either men or women. Therefore, "to help overcome soldiers' reluctance to fight, cultures develop gender roles that equate 'manhood' with toughness under fire." Since most mainstream military historians give little thought to gender's role in warfare, Goldstein gives credit to a number of feminist arguments, which provide explanations for gender's continually persistent role in war. He concludes that gender and war are inextricably linked. The results of this study concur. Theories about gender and war hold some merit, yet none adequately explains the WWII experiences of both Soviet and American airwomen. War complicates human encounters above and beyond their already muddled state. Each country studied possessed unique and distinguishable factors from the other, yet gender played a significant role in the fates of military women and continues to do so today.

Attitudes and Ideology

One factor that is not unique to either the Soviet Union or the United States is the routine exploitation of women's labor during times of crisis. Women in every society, time, and place have helped sustain the war effort, especially economically. Goldstein argues that women cannot become warriors because female labor keeps the war machine running.⁸ Only when labor shortages reach critical situations will governments enlist female labor for front line duty. This essay will ultimately explore why and how much the two subject nations were willing to make these adjustments. First though, governments must recruit women as wartime workers before moving them to the battlefield.

Goldstein goes on to note: "In every society at war, women workers help sustain both the war effort and the economy behind it."⁹ Although women's industrial labor plays a secondary role in this study, the use of women in industry by the United States provides an excellent example of how attitudes toward women's labor can fluctuate, albeit temporarily, to justify their workforce participation. During the 1930s, public attitudes urged women not to work, but circumstances were such that women and their families had no other options for survival. By the early 1940s, women entered the workforce at double the rate of men, and a patriotic public expected women to man the home front while their

⁸ Joshua S. Goldstein, *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 380.

⁹ Ibid.

husbands and brothers went off to war.

In the United States, the government never conscripted women for either labor or military service; instead local authorities resorted to enrollment drives. The tactics the government used came in a variety of forms. Employers reported that war jobs were easy and high paying. In most cases, these jobs proved exhausting and required long work hours. Employers glorified war jobs as patriotic, as a means to attract female employment. If the numbers of female employees fell short of the need, the government and employers could shame women into taking the harder jobs, "This Soldier May Die – Unless You Man the Idle Machine." This tactic sometimes proved problematic for the government, since many soldiers, husbands, and brothers died regardless of actions on the home front. Therefore, the government turned to peer pressure. What might your neighbors think if you are not in the factory working? Whatever its form though, advertising for workers still appealed to a women's sense of responsibility in the home and to her femininity. This was especially true when recruiting for military service, since women feared service would negate their femininity. Recruiting posters began to claim that women could look feminine even while doing a "man's job." Instead of playing on the loyalty to one's country, some advertisements called on the women's loyalty to her man and her family.¹⁰

¹⁰ Ibid., 388.

The arrangements that developed in the workforce, whether in industry or military service, almost everywhere were cast as temporary. Women were encouraged to maintain "traditional womanhood" underneath a "begrimed exterior" covered by work coveralls or a military uniform. This, in theory, would ease their transition back into womanly roles upon the war's completion. Even "Rosie the Riveter" began a transformation to "Rosie the Housewife" in popular advertising. The government intended for the entire transformation of the woman's image and role during wartime to be a temporary solution. When the war ended, employers laid off workers on a last in, first out basis, meaning that women were the first to go. Although the exploitation of women's cheap, temporary labor fails to explain how war roles develop, it demonstrates women's labor as integral to wartime success and that war can relax gender roles. Once peace returns so do traditional gender roles.¹¹

In the early 1940s, attitudes toward women in the United States faced many challenges. Still reeling from the effects of the Great Depression, many women, especially the younger generation, now had to balance their primary roles as wives and mothers with new disruptive forces such as the military draft. The times offered advantages to women as well, such as higher paying jobs and opportunities in higher education.¹² Women became involved in every aspect of

¹¹ Goldstein, 389-396.

¹² D'Ann Campbell, *Women at War with America: Private Lives in a Patriotic Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 5.

war preparations, except for the directing of it. They also entered the workforce in unprecedented numbers. Via civic groups, women played important roles implementing taxation and rationing, yet remained excluded from the decisions made about taxation, rationing, and even the recruitment of women. D'Ann Campbell claims that women both went *to* war with America and participated fully *at* war with America. Many women, although patriotic and willing to contribute to the war effort, perceived the war as a threat to their private lives and their values in general.¹³

In the history of the Soviet Union, the exploitation of women appears not only during wartime but also during other times of crises as well. From the earliest days of the Russian Revolution and even before, Marxists ideology promised to emancipate women from the slavery they suffered under the oppression of the bourgeoisie. In order for the Revolution to succeed, Bolsheviks claimed, women had to become full, equal participants. The Bolsheviks believed in several policies that would grant women the freedom that capitalism undermined, but the most important was the principle that the state would assume the functions of the family. In this way, women on equal footing with men could participate as paid workers outside the home.¹⁴

¹³ Ibid., 4.

¹⁴ Wendy Z. Goldman, "Working-Class Women and the 'Withering Away' of the Family: Popular Responses to Family Policy," *Russia in the era of NEP: Explorations in Soviet Society and Culture*, eds. Sheila Fitzpatrick, Alexander Rabinowitch, and Richard Stites. (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1991): 126.

Following the Revolution, the promises of Bolshevism may have benefited women had the Soviet Union been ready to live up to its end of the bargain. Unfortunately for women, it was not. The state of industry and unemployment overall was worse for women than for men, and, further, the socialist goal of providing communal daycare, laundry, and dining facilities intended to minimize women's labor in the home never came to fruition. Women continued to bear the sole burden of household responsibilities while also playing significant roles as toilers in industrialization and collectivization. In sum, they had to work harder in new arenas with little relief from their traditional responsibilities.

By the 1940s, the state officially recognized women's contributions and their significance. In reality though, the relations between men and women remained unequal. By the end of WWII, the government sent women a similar message, continue to work hard but recognize that men need to resume the positions they had left during the war. Women were also reminded to tend to the needs of their families. The Soviet government urged women to rebuild society by nurturing their families and by providing a stable family life.¹⁵ In some extent they achieved the equality Marx wrote about. They worked in back-breaking labor traditionally associated with men's work. However, they remained subordinate to men as a whole.

¹⁵ Ibid., 272-273.

Conclusion

One of the most prominent military historians, John Keegan has claimed that "warfare is...the one human activity from which women, with the most insignificant exceptions, have always and everywhere stood apart.... Women, however, do not fight.... They rarely fight among themselves and they never, in any military sense, fight men."¹⁶ Because of attitudes like his, historians rarely include women in the historiography of WWII. Feminist scholars offer a variety of reasons for women's absence from war and for their subsequent dismissal from the histories of it, but probably the most significant reason for their absence is because women are busy sustaining the war machine. This proved true in the United States and also in the Soviet Union.

In the United States, the government recruited women into war production jobs in record numbers. Occupations opened to them like never before, yet employers and women alike remained preoccupied with an unwillingness to sacrifice a woman's femininity no matter where she worked. On the Eve of WWII, Soviet attitudes toward women had changed little from the early years of the Russian Revolution. The government claimed that women had achieved full equality with men, but the reality for women contrasted sharply with official attitudes. Despite "liberation," women still maintained responsibility for home and family and also maintained jobs on the farms and in

¹⁶ Keegan, 76.

the factories. Having to work just as hard as men, there was little chance for their advancement into positions of power. In both cases, the exploitation of women proved essential for victory.

Despite all of this, women did serve in the military and in combat during WWII. They also served in aviation, which like combat was a clearly masculine occupation. Both the United States and the Soviet Union opened military aviation to women, but for different reasons and in different capacities. The next chapters compare their reasons for this and attempt to discover why both groups faced similar outcomes, despite dissimilar circumstances.

CHAPTER 2

FEMALE AVIATORS IN WORLD WAR II

In the United States, women's military activity in WWII developed quite differently from that in the other belligerent states. American public reaction and the democratic electoral process constrained the more progressive ideas about the possibilities of female military participation. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, the government formed the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) and by mid-1943 the WAAC became a full part of the regular army as the Women's Army Corps (WAC). In all, nearly 150,000 women served in the WAC, but over 350,000 served in the different branches of the nation's military.¹⁷

The Soviet Union, by contrast, had little time for auxiliaries. In WW II women participated in the Red Army in unprecedented numbers. They served as nurses and doctors as in other militaries, yet they also served in front-line units and in almost every military occupation. This chapter will compare the formation and experiences of the WASPs, the only American auxiliary that was never militarized, and the three aviation regiments of Soviet women that faced

¹⁷ Goldstein, 88.

combat every bit as grueling as their male counterparts.

Women Enter the United States Military

This section of the study must give proper attention to processes other than just the recruitment of female pilots. First, more necessary than in the Soviet case, this section highlights the path taken to convince an American public that women's military service was acceptable. Second, this chapter briefly details genesis of the WAAC, because without it, the WASPs probably would have not gotten off the ground.

Republican Congresswoman Edith Nourse Rogers (MA) first proposed the formation of the WAAC in May 1941. Rogers regretted the unsatisfactory treatment given to those women who worked for the military in the nation's previous world war. The government considered those women who served in World War I civilians and therefore they did not receive benefits or compensation for their service. Early pioneers of women's wartime service, like Rogers, did not demand women's full participation in combat. Instead, they campaigned for just recognition for the services they rendered.¹⁸

Many have argued that military service equates to the rights of citizenship. Just like women, the government prohibited African-American men from armed service, thereby creating a hierarchical system that privileged white men. The

¹⁸ Leisa D. Meyer, *Creating G.I. Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women's Army Corps During World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 11.

creation of the WAAC moved the system toward equality, yet potentially proved more threatening than similar types of movements in the traditional civilian labor force, since the military remained a very masculine institution. Leisa Meyer contends that most white men who served in the war performed noncombat functions; however, the government still considered them soldiers. "The tensions between these concepts- -'woman' and 'soldier'- -and the attempts to untangle and reconstitute this dichotomy underlay much of the public and congressional debate about women's military service."¹⁹ The subjects of the debates never addressed the contributions women could make; rather, they dealt with the feminization of the military and the emasculation of male soldiers.

Advocates of WAAC legislation certainly recognized the difficulties they faced in convincing the legislature and the public that women's military service held no threat to accepted gender relationships. Similar to the propaganda that civilian employers used to attract and admit women to the civilian workforce, the government used the same tactics to attract women to military service and to convince the public of its acceptability.

Proponents first argued that women's military service merely extended her obligation to home defense. To support their argument they cited the brave, patriotic women employed by the British armed forces. To most Americans, these women appeared as brave heroines fighting for the defense of their families,

¹⁹ Ibid., 12-13.

homes, and their country. As a 'total war,' WWII recognized no limitations such as battlefields and demanded all resources to achieve victory.²⁰ Proponents of the bill also addressed the argument that women serving in the armed forces would neglect their home and family responsibilities, especially that of motherhood. Some then argued that only single, childless women could serve; however, eventual WAAC legislation ignored this restriction.

Probably the most difficult problem WAAC supporters faced dealt with the popular myth that women's entrance into the military threatened male privileges, honor, and masculinity. Proponents crafted unique responses to this worry. Women, they argued, never intended to threaten men's positions; instead, they intended to release men from the home front so they would be free for 'manly' assignments in the field of combat. No longer would men have to perform 'womanly' clerical and communications duties; now they could perform the masculine work of soldiering. Unfortunately, proponents of the legislation legitimized the sex segregation that would exist in the military for many years to come, despite having facilitated the first, vital step of integration.²¹

As in the civilian sector, the call to women's patriotism proved the most effective measure. This argument worked well to call women to serve and had the added benefit of labeling those who failed to support the legislation as

²⁰ Ibid., 20.

²¹ Ibid., 21.

unpatriotic. Many Congressmen believed they had little choice but to support the bill, lest they face accusations of failed patriotism or of "siding with Hitler."²²

After lengthy debate over issues such as benefits and compensation, Congress finally passed the bill on 14 May 1942. President Roosevelt, a firm supporter of the legislation, signed it into law one day later. In spite of the victory, the battles the new Corps faced had only just begun. The next hurdle the women's army faced was the transformation from an auxiliary into a full-fledged part of the U.S. Army. Congress introduced the first round of legislation in January 1943 and the WAC became a reality in September of the same year. WAAC dissatisfaction with receiving lesser pay for the same work resulted in the push for the creation of an equal female institution. The army bureaucracy also had little desire to maintain two separate sets of regulations for two bodies of soldiers. Thus, the establishment began incorporating women as full members into the army.²³

About the same time talk of integration began, the "whispering campaign" also surfaced and was largely the product of military men. Citizens expressed concern that women as part of the military would lack the sexual protection afforded under the WAAC administration. Enlisted men who often fared badly under commissioned officers easily imagined that officers would

²² Ibid., 21-22.

²³ Ibid., 38.

exploit women in the ranks. Other GIs simply rejected out of hand the incorporation of female soldiers, so the slanderous campaign of rumors and hostile accounts thrived.

Surveys indicated that many male soldiers believed the women's service was unnecessary and their only viable role was as prostitutes. Widespread reports of WAC immorality adversely affected recruiting efforts. On the advice of their soldier brothers and friends, many women refused to enlist because of the alleged immorality among the ranks of the women. Colonel Oveta Culp Hobby, the first WAC commander, realized this and responded to the concerns that military service threatened accepted gender hierarchies and sexual norms. To mobilize women into military service, the administration relied on many of the same tactics civilian employers used to encourage women to work, including calls of patriotism and the traditional feminine theme of self-sacrifice. They had to convince women that service in the military was necessary to winning the war. Ultimately, Hobby's tactics proved successful. At one point, 215,000 women were serving in uniform.²⁴

The United States Recruits Women Pilots

WASPs and their proponents faced these same problems and more when it came to legitimizing their service in the U.S. military. Since the government

²⁴ This number includes all branches of the armed forces.

kept the WASP program top secret, the general public knew very little about its details until well after the war's conclusion. In September 1942, the government created two flying organizations for women which eventually merged to form the WASPs. The government first developed the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS), initially comprised of ten pilots and then twenty-eight by the next year. Only a few days later, General Henry "Hap" Arnold, the Army Air Forces (AAF) Commander, approved the formation of the second organization, the Women's Flying Training Detachment (WFTD). In July 1943, the two programs merged forming the WASPs.²⁵ Like the WAC, the WASP program had its pioneers. In this case, they were Nancy Harkness Love, the WAFS' first director, and Jacqueline Cochran, who became the head of the WFTD and then the WASP program.

Reasons for the program's formation are subject to little historical dispute. The justification for the program arose from the need to send all qualified male pilots to positions overseas. Although the program had a definite mission and objectives, it expanded beyond the initial proposal, which were as follows:

1. To see if women could serve as military pilots, and, if so, to form the nucleus of an organization which could be rapidly expanded.
2. To release male pilots for combat.
3. To decrease the Air Forces' total demands from the cream of the manpower pool.²⁶

²⁵ Molly Merryman, *Clipped Wings: The Rise and Fall of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) of World War II*, (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 6-7.

²⁶ Central Flying Training Command, *History of the WASP program*, 179, as quoted in Merryman, 7.

The WASPs performed an essential role and performed it well. They flew almost every type of military aircraft from fighters to bombers. They ferried aircraft from factories to overseas shipment points. They tested new aircraft and repaired old ones, and they towed targets so that antiaircraft ground forces could train using live ammunition. While they served voluntarily in the continental United States, their mission was still dangerous. In all, they flew over sixty million miles in seventy-eight different types of military aircraft. The program graduated 1,074 women, of which 916 actively served.²⁷

Despite the variety of missions, the type of aircraft flown, and the fact that they wore military uniforms, the WASP program maintained civilian status throughout its two-year existence. The women earned \$250 a month but received no insurance or military benefits. Thirty-eight women died, yet they did not receive military honors, nor did their families receive any recognition for their service or any type of veteran's compensation.

Molly Merryman believes that WASPs are unique among the women who served in WWII. In the other services, women typically served in positions traditionally and culturally gendered female, such as clerical work and nursing. Not only was piloting a traditionally masculine role, but it was also very desirable. Pilots were considered elite in the US military, and WASPs were getting the very best assignments. The AAF assigned them to noncombat

²⁷ Olga Gruhzit-Hoyt, *They Also Served: American Women in World War II* (New York:

positions, stateside, flying the military's newest aircraft. In *Clipped Wings*, Merryman argues that "by taking on roles and missions previously associated with the masculine, WASPs challenged assumptions about male supremacy in a wartime role."²⁸

When the call first went out through newspapers and recruiters that the AAF was recruiting female pilots, 25,000 young women volunteered. The first women pilots had to meet stiff requirements. They had to be between the ages of 21 and 35, high school graduates, and American citizens and have a minimum five hundred flight hours or hold a commercial pilots license.²⁹ They also had to report to the training center at Wilmington, Delaware, at their own expense.³⁰ These requirements changed throughout the program's twenty-seven month existence; however, at all times it remained more stringent than the standards set for male recruits.³¹

The government's recruitment campaign was an easy one. Propaganda wasn't needed because "The program attracted people who were willing to venture being different and to risk following the dream that they always had," said WASP Ethel Finley.³² These women came from all different walks of life.

Birch Lane Press, 1995), 151.

²⁸ Merryman, 3.

²⁹ Men selected for pilot training were not required to have a pilot's license or any flight experience for acceptance into the AAF's flight training program. Merryman, 29.

³⁰ After the WAFS and WFTD merged, the women had to find transportation to Sweetwater, TX, where all women pilots received training. Merryman, 14.

³¹ Army Air Forces, *Women Pilots in the Air Transport Command*, January 1945, 13.

³² Quoted in Merryman, 14.

Some were rich and some very poor. WASP Madge Rutherford Minton describes what held them altogether:

We had millionaires, and we had very poor girls who worked very hard just to buy flight time. But they had one thing in common, and that was the love of flying. They were determined to fly, and they saw this opportunity to fly for our country and help win World War II.³³

Finley adds:

We came from all walks of life. Many were teachers. We had everything from teachers to a Ziegfeld Follies girl, clerks, secretaries, office workers—every walk of life. But I think underneath all of it was this kind of special characteristic of the love of flying, of patriotism and also the spirit of adventure.³⁴

Not all patriotic women, though, with a love of flying were admitted to the program. There was also a subjective nature to the process. As mentioned, 25,000 girls applied, yet only 1,830 were admitted. The head of the program, Jacqueline Cochran, was very concerned about the image of the WASPs and conducted many of the required personal interviews herself. The guidelines Cochran used were not regulated; instead the sifting process was based on her best judgment and she selected women based on what she determined best fit the image of the WASPs. No documentation exists as to what were acceptable guidelines, but Merryman infers that women with certain backgrounds or perceived sexual orientation were naturally excluded. Cochran did not even

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 14-15.

consider black women and only two nonwhite women were admitted overall, both Chinese-American.³⁵

Attitudes toward female pilots varied from the time they were first recruited until the military prematurely disbanded the program. As mentioned, they were not in the military, so they did not hold rank as did their male counterparts and they did not receive the same compensation. WASPs joined the program with the expectation of eventual militarization. They wore military-style uniforms, trained in drill and ceremonies and followed military customs and courtesies. Life for the women varied depending on which base they were stationed at. In some cases, the women could not even dine with the AAF officer, who they flew missions with. Most bases did allow women to dine in the officers' mess, yet others restricted them to WAC's or nurses' messes.³⁶ This became part of the WASP dilemma, no standard treatment from base to base.

The program's secrecy created additional problems for the women and further affected attitudes. Because public relations forbade the WASPs from making media contact, the importance of the program and the women's missions remained closely guarded secrets. Base personnel, oftentimes refused to believe the women were pilots and would not service their aircraft. On some occasions, the base police arrested the women for impersonating soldiers or attempting to

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Eastern Flying Training Command, *History of the Women Airforce Service Pilots*, 4.

steal aircraft.³⁷ To eliminate some of these problems, base commanders ordered female pilots not to wear their uniforms on base and, instead, to carry a card that indicated their position as a civilian pilot working for the AAF. Whether in uniform or not, treatment at any two bases was rarely the same.

Most WASPs reported positive treatment by AAF personnel, especially their commanding officers. WASP performance reports reflected this positive treatment. Most reports indicated the women did their difficult jobs well and worked well with male AAF personnel. The final report from Buckingham AAF base represented one of the most enthusiastic:

Buckingham Field was sorry to lose their WASPs. The men on the line and the air crew members who helped keep the gunnery missions operating had grown to respect the blue WASP uniform and also had grown to admire the women who wore those colors. A more enviable record could not have been left.³⁸

Not all commanders appreciated the WASP's service and in some cases requested the WASPs be transferred elsewhere. Most WASPs reported that the worst treatment was being ignored. At some bases, "nobody spoke to us from the time we landed until the time we left. We walked into the Operations office, checked in, and still we were met only with an air of hostile resentment."³⁹

Throughout the war, the American public remained only marginally aware of the WASP program. The AAF intentionally limited publicity because of

³⁷ Charlotte Knight, "Service Pilots," *Skyways*, 1944, 74.

³⁸ Army Air Forces, History of the WASP Detachment at Buckingham Army Air Field, January 1945, 61, as quoted in Merryman, 22.

the experimental nature of the program and for fear of public resistance if female casualties resulted. The official plan was simply to keep WASPs out of the media.⁴⁰ The earliest mainstream media accounts of women pilots proved positive, but as the war drew closer to end those accounts took a negative spin. The following chapter will address this turn and its contribution to the early demise of the WASP program.

Soviet Airwomen in World War II

Even in the Soviet Union, historians have hesitated in analyzing the role women have played in combat, interesting since women there have played a significant role in both combat support and combat itself. The remainder of this chapter will examine the women who served in combat aviation in the Soviet Air Force. An important question emerges in understanding this unique role women played in WW II: why was the Soviet Union the only country to allow women to fly in combat?

To date, only one Western scholar has thoroughly studied the reasons for the Soviets actions during WWII. In *Wings, Women and War: Soviet Airwomen in World War II Combat*, Reina Pennington attempts to discover why the Soviet government allowed women to participate in aerial combat and why it

³⁹ Knight, 70.

⁴⁰ War Department, Bureau of Public Relations, Public Relations Policy for WASP.

practically forgot their history once WW II ended.⁴¹

By the 1941 Nazi invasion, the Soviet economy was already in a state of dire emergency. Stalin's forced industrialization of the 1930s drew women into many nontraditional labor roles. The government mobilized everyone for the war effort. At first, the government mobilized women into industrial and military support roles, not into the military itself. At the outset, women accounted for 40 percent of the industrial labor force and even worked in occupations that had traditionally been all male, like mining. In addition, women began digging trenches and building fortified garrisons for the Soviet military.⁴²

In 1942, a significant shift occurred. Manpower shortages forced the Soviets to start enlisting childless women who were not otherwise engaged in the war effort. By 1943 women's participation reached its peak when estimates indicate that as many as 800,000 women, mostly in their late teens, were serving in the Red Army.⁴³ At least half of this number is thought to have served in front-line units although official data are extremely vague.⁴⁴ Women were

⁴¹ Reina Pennington, *Wings, Women and War: Soviet Airwomen in World War II Combat* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2001).

⁴² Joshua S. Goldstein, *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 64-65.

⁴³ Eight-hundred thousand women would be 8 percent of the Red Army, a number that shows even more significance when one considers that in 1991 only 7 percent of the US forcers that served in Operation Desert Storm were women.

⁴⁴ Anne Eliot Griesse and Richard Stites. "Russia: Revolution and War," in *Female Soldiers Combatants or Noncombatants? Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. by Nancy Loring Goldman (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1982), 73. According to them, flat

concentrated in several key areas. In order of highest concentration they were medical (especially nursing), antiaircraft units, combat aviation, partisan forces, infantry and armor.⁴⁵ This was not the first time women served in the Soviet military, but certainly it was the most extensive.

In 1941, the Soviet Union became the first state to allow women to fly in combat. As with many firsts, these women had a pioneer. Her name was Marina Raskova. She was able to convince Stalin of the potential for women pilots to serve in combat. Although the Soviet Union had other female pioneers in aviation, none had more appeal or credits to her name than Raskova. She started her heroic career in 1933 by becoming the first woman to qualify as an Air Force navigator. At the age of twenty-two, she became the first female instructor of air navigation at the Zhukovskii Air Academy and her list of firsts continued. She eventually became a pilot and flying instructor as well. Before the war, Raskova became most famous for a cross-country, world record-setting flight from Moscow to Komsomolsk in the Far East. While the "Flight of the Rodina" did not cover the full 6,500 kilometers, it did break the world record for the women's straight-line distance and established a new women's nonstop, broken-line, distance record.⁴⁶

numbers were issued by the Soviet regime and there is no method to test accuracy of these numbers.

⁴⁵ Goldstein, 66.

⁴⁶ Poor communications and bad weather caused the three-woman crewed aircraft to make a forced landing after covering only 5,947 kilometers of a straight-line distance. Raskova bailed out and survived for ten days before finally being rescued. Pennington, 11-17.

Raskova and her fellow aircrew became the first three women to receive the Hero of the Soviet Union award and the only women to receive it before WWII. As important as this was, probably more important was the personal interest that Stalin took in the women and their record-breaking flight. Soviet aviation in the late 1930s was an arena of public excitement for Stalin and his regime. The records that aviators set helped justify the Soviet industrialization process and, to Stalin, proved superiority in Soviet training and technology. In having women participate in these flying feats, the government could also portray its women as "superior products of socialism."⁴⁷

Raskova was able to develop personal ties with Stalin and other leaders in government. He took a special interest in her achievements, and Pennington contends it was this personal interest and Raskova's influence that permitted her to form the women's combat regiments during the war. According to Alexander Werth, who lived in the Soviet Union both before and during the war, aviators like Raskova became linked with Stalin as well as with Soviet preparations for war:

No wonder that in those days people looked to the Army for protection and that for example some women ace-fliers like Valentina Grizodubova, Polina Osipenko and Marina Raskova became popular idols. When in May 1939 one of them, Polina Osipenko, and the ace-flier Serov were killed in an air-crash, it was like a day of national mourning; they were given a public funeral in

⁴⁷ Pennington, 12-13.

Red Square, and the pall-bearers included Stalin, Molotov, Beria and other leaders.⁴⁸

In October 1941, the government gave Raskova command of an all-female aviation group, No. 122. The three regiments formed under the 122d trained the entirety of their personnel to include pilots, navigators, mechanics, and ground crews.⁴⁹ The regiments included the 586th Fighter Aviation Regiment, the 587th Bomber Aviation Regiment (later the 125th Guards), and the 588th Night Bomber Aviation Regiment (later the 46th Guards). The Soviets organized these regiments just as the all-male regiments; they wore men's uniforms and they carried no special designators identifying them as women or auxiliaries. They were part of the Soviet Air Force.

Official numbers claim these women flew over 30,000 combat missions, which included both fighter and bomber sorties. The most famous of the three regiments was the 46th Guards Bomber Regiment, also known as the "night witches."⁵⁰ Although this regiment, consisting of over 4,000 members, suffered heavy losses throughout the war, there is little debate about its performance.⁵¹ The women flew antiquated biplanes (the Po-2 was built in the 1920s), hitting German positions at night, and doing so without parachutes. Each crew would fly five to ten missions a night giving the Germans no rest, but also providing

⁴⁸ Alexander Werth, *Russia at War: 1941-1945*, (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1964), 8.

⁴⁹ A typical regiment consisted of three squadrons of ten aircraft each.

⁵⁰ A German nickname, not Russian.

⁵¹ The 46th lost about 27 percent of its flying personnel, average for this type of unit.

them the opportunity to anticipate the night witches' arrival. One veteran of the 46th recalled her experiences:

It means coming under fire from anti-aircraft weapons of every caliber...it means enemy night-fighters, blinding searchlights and often bad weather, too: low clouds, fog, snow, ice, and gales that throw a light aircraft from one wingtip to the other and wrench the controls from your hands.... And all this in a Po-2, which is small, slow and as easily set alight as a match.⁵²

During the war, all information indicates the women's regiments were treated no differently from the men's. They flew the same types of missions and by the end of the war, women made up 12 percent of the Soviet Air Force including those who served in mixed-gender units. A total of ninety-one women received the Hero of the Soviet Union medal,⁵³ the highest award for valor, and at least 33 of those were combat aviators. General-Colonel of Aviation Vladimir Lavrinenkov recalled the women's performance:

The women pilots served at the airfield on an equal footing with the men. And they even fought no worse than the men.... It wasn't easy for the girls at the front. Especially for women fighter pilots: air combat demanded from them unusual physical strength and endurance. And the fact that the girls without complaining bore all the difficulties is a credit to them, and evoked tremendous respect from those around them.⁵⁴

⁵² Svetlana Alexiyevich, "War's Unwomanly Face" (U voiny – ne zhenskoe litso...), trans. Keith Hammond and Lyudmila Lezhneva (Moscow, 1988), p. 153, quoted in Reina Pennington, "Do not Speak of the Services You Rendered: Women Veterans of Aviation in the Soviet Union," in Gerard J. DeGroot, and Corinna Peniston, eds. *A Soldier and a Woman: Sexual Integration in the Military*. (Great Britain: Pearson Education Limited, 2000), 154.

⁵³ Rough equivalent of the United States' Medal of Honor.

⁵⁴ Vladimir Dmitrievich Lavrinenkov, *Vozvrashchenie v nebo (Return to the Sky) 2nd Edition* (Moscow, 1983), pp. 56-57, as quoted in Pennington, 156.

Even before the government officially approved the formation of the regiments, Raskova received thousands of letters from young woman volunteering to serve. Most heard about the recruitment through word of mouth, as there is no record of the campaign receiving wide publicity. Polin Gelman recalled:

On 10 October 1941 all the students were digging antitank ditches along the Belarusian road near Moscow. Among the students the rumor was going around that girls were being taken into aviation. My girlfriend was studying at the Moscow Aviation Institute. She said that she had already received orders. The next morning, I submitted all the paperwork to the Komsomol Central Committee.⁵⁵

Most women who volunteered or were recruited were young and single, although some were married with children. Raskova, herself, had an eight-year-old daughter that she left with her mother.⁵⁶ Many women already held military rank and formed the cadre of the leadership positions in the regiments. The requirements were much less stringent than was the case in the United States, but tough nonetheless. There were no medical physicals, yet the military only accepted those with the strongest flying credentials as pilots. The regiments also needed navigators, mechanics, and the remainder of the ground crew. Like Cochran, Raskova interviewed each volunteer personally, not so much to see if she measured up, but rather Raskova had the task of determining which job best suited each recruit.

⁵⁵ Pennington, 31.

Soviet airwomen received surprisingly little media attention, so uncovering attitudes toward them proves a difficult task. Not all women pilots flew with Raskova's three regiments though, so looking at male attitudes toward them in mixed-gender units proves helpful. Inna Pasportnikova reported the difficulties the women faced when arriving at a mixed unit: "When we arrived at a male regiment, men did not want to fly with us, because of the responsibility, and also because they were afraid for themselves. They were afraid that the female wingmen would not cover them."⁵⁷ Some men continued to have problems adjusting to the women fliers, yet once they proved their abilities most men adjusted quickly and without difficulty.

Why Women Combat Pilots?

When examining the use of women in combat, especially in other parts of the world, several trends emerge that allow for the relaxation of gender roles. The first is the proximity of the fighting. Only when a society faces the real threat of total annihilation will it allow its women to participate actively in combat. WW II provides an excellent examination of this theory since so many countries were involved and many of them faced a very serious threat. Although some argue that is why the Soviets allowed their women to fight, other countries that faced a similar threat did not. Japan, Germany, and Great Britain all reached

⁵⁶ Ibid., 35.

⁵⁷ Pennington, 132.

very extreme circumstances, but only allowed their women to participate on a limited scale.⁵⁸

Another argument for the use of women in combat contends that manpower shortages make the use of women necessary if not mandatory. In this way, women can assume less dangerous combat support functions that free men up for combat duty. This was certainly the stated goal in the United States with the creation of the WAC and the WASP. This was also to some extent true in the Soviet Union; however, Pennington contends that this could not be true in the case of the Soviet Union using women pilots. When hostilities commenced in October 1941 there was in fact a severe shortage of aircraft, but not a shortage of male pilots.⁵⁹ In addition, the total number of personnel recruited for the female aviation regiments in 1941 was too small to make a significant military difference. Finally, this argument loses all credibility in this case since Soviet women flew dangerous combat missions just as the men did.

Many argue the Soviets sent women into combat for the benefits of propaganda that it offered. This is especially true of Western observers, such as Cold War analyst George Quester:

The use of females in combat service in the past has been defensive strategy.... When one's country is invaded, women wind up in guerilla battalions as in Yugoslavia, or are portrayed as regular infantry as in Russia.... Whether or not this characterization is valid, it always has been effective propaganda. A nation forced to send its women into

⁵⁸ Goldstein, 16.

⁵⁹ Pennington, 56-57.

combat must be the underdog, the nation that has been threatened, the nation that cares the very most about the justice of its cause.⁶⁰

If the propaganda argument held true, then Soviet airwomen would have received much more press attention than was actually the case. In fact, there is only little evidence of the Soviets ever propagandizing their female combat fliers. Western wartime correspondents who covered the Soviet war effort rarely even mention female combatants, much less airwomen.⁶¹ Alexander Werth, who wrote volumes on the war, rarely mentions female combatants but does mention Raskova's flying achievements before the war on a couple of occasions, this despite the fact that Werth makes considerable effort to document Soviet wartime propaganda efforts.⁶² Werth does note that the Soviets made attempts at propaganda by encouraging women to join the labor force. One wartime poster cheered, "Women, go and work on the collective farms, replace the men now in the Army!"⁶³

Not only did Western correspondents virtually ignore women combatants, according to Pennington, but the most famous Soviet journalists did as well.⁶⁴ Most important of all propaganda techniques were the speeches of

⁶⁰ George H. Quester, "Women in Combat," *International Security* (Spring, 1977):90-91.

⁶¹ Even famous female correspondents such as Margaret Bourke-White rarely make mention of women in their books about the war.

⁶² Werth, 8, 48.

⁶³ Ibid., 176-177.

⁶⁴ Pennington cites the most famous wartime correspondents, Konstantin Simonov, Vasili Grossman, and Ilya Ehrenburg, as having made no reference to the female fliers and only a few references to women combatants in general. *Wings, Women and War*, 59.

Stalin, who also ignored the contributions of Soviet military women. In his most important speeches given in Red Square on the anniversary of the revolution, Stalin refers to partisan men and women, to men and women collective farmers; however, in turning to the contributions of the military he notes, "Comrades, Red Army and Red Navy men."⁶⁵ In one of Stalin's most important speeches on 6 November 1944, he stressed the contributions of women, but not those at the front:

The matchless labor exploits of the Soviet women... will go down forever in history; for it is they that have borne the brunt of the work in the factories and mills and on the collective and state farms.... They have shown themselves worthy of their fathers and sons, husbands and brothers, who are defending their homeland against the German fascist fiends.⁶⁶

There was, in any case, some coverage of female Soviet combatants and airwomen especially, but these mostly appeared in women's publications and honored collective rather than individual accomplishments. In many cases the coverage was intended to improve the morale of the women rather than to serve as a propaganda tool. Unlike in the United States, propaganda was not needed to get women into factories or to convince the public that it was acceptable for women to work outside the home. Industrialization in the thirties had already accomplished that task. One might also note at this point, that the communist

⁶⁵ Werth, 248-249.

⁶⁶ Joseph Stalin, *The Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union* (New York: International Publishers, 1945), 134-135, in Pennington, *Wings, Women and War*, 61.

government likely felt less restricted by public opinion than Western democracies.⁶⁷

Proximity of fighting and desperate manpower shortages, like in other belligerent countries, were no doubt responsible for bringing women into the line of combat duty, but not necessarily into the role of combat aviation. Propaganda had a role, but it was not used or needed to shame men into military service. Nor was the Soviet government using propaganda to represent itself to the rest of the world as the Great Patriotic War's underdog. So then what or who was primarily responsible for creating the Soviet women's aviation regiments? Pennington contends that the primary reason the units were formed was the result of Marina Raskova's influence, "Raskova had the fame, the skill, and the personal connections that enabled her to pursue her idea, and she had strong popular backing from the women who appealed to her and the Soviet government."⁶⁸

While some argue that in the Soviet system it would be unlikely for an individual, like Raskova, to have such influence, Pennington finds little to dispute her theory. Raskova had access, she was a member of the Supreme Soviet, and she was wildly prominent in Soviet popular culture. In her own

⁶⁷ D'Ann Campbell, "Women in Combat: The World War II Experience in the United States, Great Britain, Germany and the Soviet Union," *Journal of Military History* 57 (April, 1993): 319.

⁶⁸ Pennington, *Wings, Women and War*, 173.

biography as well as those of other female aviation veterans, it becomes clear that Raskova played the most important role in the formation of the regiments.

Stalin's role remains uncertain. Pennington contends that it was likely not his idea, because if it were then the units would have received much more publicity.

Stalin, though, would have had to give his approval. Pennington cites Walter

Laqueur in her analysis of how the Soviet system probably worked:

It is crucial for the understanding of totalitarian regimes to recognize that while not all decisions are actually made in and by the center, no truly important decision is made without the knowledge, let alone against the wish, of the leader. It is equally important to realize that while not all decisions are made by the supreme leader, all could in principle have been made by him.⁶⁹

Conclusion

The road to military participation for American and Soviet airwomen was wrought with differences, yet some similarities existed. In both countries powerful women promoted the use of women fliers in the military. In the US, Love and Cochran piggybacked on the accomplishments of the earlier female auxiliaries, whereas in the USSR, Raskova's reputation and power alone provided impetus for the Soviets' use of women in aerial combat. In both states, women felt the patriotism and the call to serve that many of their male contemporaries also felt. In both countries, too, manpower shortages allowed

⁶⁹ Walter Laqueur, *The Fate of the Revolution: Interpretations of Soviet History*, rev. and updated ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 247, quoted in Pennington, *Wings, Women and War*, 26.

women to enter all sorts of occupations, normally considered off-limits to them. The Soviets, though, went a step further and allowed to enter the completely masculine world of combat.

During the war, Soviet citizens had little time to worry about women's participation on the battlefield. They also had little energy to worry about the image of women or the emasculation of the military; most only concerned themselves with survival. Because of the USSR's autocratic nature, lengthy bureaucratic processes were not necessary to send women to the front lines. Women already held positions in the military, so the transition to battle was much less contentious than in the United States

Both groups of women performed dangerous missions and performed them well, yet neither of these states made much media noise about the participation of women in military aviation. This was the War Department's official policy in the United States. As the war began to wind down, however, the media began an all-out assault on the WASPs, a factor that definitely contributed to their early tickets home. The Soviet government also sent its airwomen home with little fanfare. The next chapter will discuss why both of these countries rapidly dismissed their female aviators despite their heroic and selfless service.

CHAPTER 3

DEMOBILIZATION AND BEYOND

This study already has established the importance of the wartime contributions of both American and Soviet female aviators during WWII. Both groups contributed an invaluable service to their respective militaries, yet both countries demobilized women rapidly and almost completely from military aviation very near to the war's conclusion. The U.S. government even did so before the war ended. In previous studies, scholars have assumed the sole reason for this was that the women were no longer needed as military aviators. Authors Molly Merryman and Reina Pennington reject assumptions such as this and look to gender's role in wartime to find more meaningful answers.

This chapter will start with an analysis of the WASPs' unsuccessful fight for militarization and the subsequent premature demise of the program. The chapter next explores the rapid demilitarization of the female Soviet pilots, whose heroic tale has just recently been remembered. The chapter will conclude with the efforts at keeping the women's interests alive, an effort that was much more successful in the US than in the USSR.

WASPs Fight for Militarization

The Army Air Forces made several attempts to militarize the WASPs throughout the program's existence with little success. At issue, was the way to go about making it a part of the regular army. Several ideas surfaced from making WASPs a component of the WAC to creating a separate entity similar to the AAF itself. The AAF did not begin drafting an official bill, however, until 1943 when all other avenues for militarization had been exhausted.

The AAF developed the WASPs differently from the other women's auxiliaries. The AAF utilized a War Department bill that authorized the use civilian pilots, both men and women, for domestic missions. Conversely, the Navy formed the WAVES and the Women's Marines as militarized units under the authorization Congress and Congress gave approval for the WAAC before officially militarizing the WAC in 1943. The AAF formed the WASPs as a civilian group and did not officially seek Congressional approval until the national mood had begun to change.⁷⁰

On 30 September 1943, Representative John Costello (CA) introduced the WASP militarization bill, as House Resolution 338. The bill was referred to the Committee on Military Affairs for approval or recommendations, where it was not debated for another six months. In the meantime, Costello drafted a lengthier bill, House Resolution 4219, which provided greater detail concerning

⁷⁰ Merryman, 31.

administration of the WASP program. The Costello Bill intended "to provide for the appointment of female pilots and aviation cadets in the Air Forces of the Army."⁷¹ When the military affairs committee finally debated the bill on 22 March 1944, only one witness testified, AAF Commanding General Henry H. Arnold. The general testified that the Army was suffering from a severe pilot shortage and that the only real need rested with ground personnel. He testified that 36,000 men who had been in the Air Forces pool awaiting flight training "had been returned to the Ground and Service Forces." Arnold argued that women should assume all domestic flying duties and all capable men be sent overseas for combat and related duties.⁷²

Not only did Arnold argue for militarization, but also he suggested the program should expand. He asked Congress to authorize an expansion of the program to between 2,000 and 2,500 pilots, so that the AAF would "get enough to replace every man qualified for overseas service whose permanent duty is flying in the United States and get all of these qualified men out of the United States and get them overseas."⁷³ On the same day as General Arnold's testimony, the Committee on Military Affairs issued a report recommending the passage of H.R. 4219, and two days later, the Senate submitted its own version of the

⁷¹ Ibid., 76.

⁷² Committee on Military Affairs, Hearings, 22 March 1944, 2.

⁷³ Ibid., 6.

legislation, Senate Resolution 1810.⁷⁴

With AAF, War Department and Committee on Military Affairs support, the bill was expected to pass without delay. This time, 1944, however, presented the problem of bad timing for the WASP legislation. At that time, media support and public opinion were turning away from all-out war efforts and toward a return to prewar way of life. America focused on the postwar economy and jobs for returning servicemen. War-production factories were laying off women in record numbers so they could return to their "rightful place" in the home. This was the atmosphere in which Congress and the media debated the WASP militarization bill. Also in 1944, Congress was more concerned about cutting military costs than with creating new programs and even more significantly, thousands of male pilots returning from the war desired the flying positions that the WASPs held.

Between March and June 1944, male pilots, civilian and military, began to receive sympathetic and substantial media coverage. Merryman contends this was the most significant reason for the failure of the WASP legislation and the subsequent demise of the program. For the most part, the Allies had achieved air superiority by 1944 and aerial combat losses were much less than expected. Experienced combat crews returned to the states and found little need for their services. At the same time, the Army was expecting a massive ground assault

⁷⁴ Merryman, 82.

against Japan which would require hundreds of thousands of infantry soldiers. The AAF, which no longer needed large numbers of pilots, released those in pilot training back to the Army for conscription into the ground forces. Thousands of men became eligible for the draft. In addition, returning combat pilots wanted to continue to fly so that they could continue to receive flight pay.⁷⁵

These disgruntled male pilots, former cadets, and trainers formed a lobby that would ultimately lead the WASPs' downfall. The lobby initiated an intensive letter-writing and media campaign that had the backing of powerful male aviation associations and veterans groups. One article entitled "Lay that Airplane Down, Babe, Cry Grounded He-Man Pilots," highlights the media's tone:

Fiercest battle in the war between men and women, outside of James Thurber's cartoons, is being fought today in the air. Thousands of well-trained male pilots are grounded and jobless, is the masculine cry, while Jacqueline Cochran's WASPS continue ferrying planes, towing targets, tracking and doing courier work of the Army at \$250 a month.

The battle of the sexes has reached such proportions that mail from outraged males is piling high on congressional desks. The Ramspeck Civil Service Investigating Committee is considering an inquiry which some observers at the Capitol consider inevitable. Supporters of the ladies, seeing the handwriting on the wall, are moving heaven and earth to get thru the Cosetello Bill that will move the winged women from Civil Service, and give them Army status and a firmer grip on their jobs.

...Some of the masculine comments aren't gallant. "Thirty-five hour wonders" is one tag they've pinned on the lady fliers.

⁷⁵ Only AAF military pilots received incentive flight pay. Civilian pilots, such as WASPs did not. Merryman, 63.

"The taxpayers we do bleed easily," said one disgruntled male. "Costs \$7000 to train every female. It's the most expensive way to ferry planes."

"If the girls were patriotic they'd resign," declared another. Chances are, say Capitol observers, that the men won't go down without a fight on the floor, waged by male members who think it's time for the ladies to holler "uncle."⁷⁶

By deflecting attention away from their unwillingness to serve as combat soldiers, the male pilot's lobby targeted their criticism toward the WASPs and found ways to articulate negative publicity for the female pilots.

To seal the WASP program's fate, the lobby approached Representative Robert Ramspeck, who chaired the Committee on the Civil Service. Directly resulting from the requests of male pilots, Ramspeck initiated an investigation into the purported failures of WASP training, the costly nature of the program and other allegations. Without ever visiting a WASP training school or any base where the WASPs were assigned, the investigative committee held up the male pilots' claims. Little of the thirteen-page report was based on AAF documents. Instead, the majority of the "facts" were submitted by the male civilian pilots' lobby. In fact, nearly half of the report focused on the plight of civilian male pilots.⁷⁷

When the report was released, it increased the amount of negative media attention the WASPs received. The report alleged that WASPs were incompetent

⁷⁶ Ruth Sarles, "Lay That Airplane Down, Babe, Cry Grounded He-Man Pilots," *Washington Daily News*, 31 March 1944.

⁷⁷ Committee on the Civil Service, Interim Report No. 1600, I.

and that new recruits lacked aviation experience. It presented facts in a distorted and negative manner and possibly more detrimentally, the report claimed the program was illegal since it was unnecessary.⁷⁸ The report ended with three conclusions:

1. The proposal to expand the WASP has not been justified. Therefore, it is recommended that the recruiting of inexperienced personnel and their training for the WASPS be immediately terminated.
2. That the use of the WASPS already trained and in training be continued and provision be made for hospitalization and insurance.
3. There exist several surpluses of experienced pilot personnel available for utilization as service pilots. Therefore it is recommended that the service of these several groups of experienced air personnel be immediately utilized.⁷⁹

The Ramspeck Report had substantial impact on the way Congress voted on the WASP bill. Congressman James Morrison (LA) entered the report into public record and urged all members of Congress to read the report as it was "concise, exact and to the point."⁸⁰ Representative Costello, sponsor of the original WASP bill, attempted to counter the report's claims. His efforts, however, were no match for the societal fears the report raised in both the media and Congress. The House finally addressed the bill on 20 June 1944, and for the first time during the war Congress rejected legislation that both the AAF and the

⁷⁸ The WASP program did lower its requirements for flight time from seventy-five to thirty-five hours; however, the report did not mention that male pilot recruits were not required to have any previous flight time.

⁷⁹ Committee on the Civil Service, Interim Report No. 1600, 13.

⁸⁰ Congressional Record-Appendix, 17 June 1944, A3305, quoted in Merryman, 88.

War Department supported.⁸¹

WASPs Are Sent Home

Following the announcement of the rulings of the Congressional committees, the national mood continued to reflect poorly on the WASPs. Based on the recommendations of the Ramspeck report, General Arnold ordered on June 26 that the WASP training program discontinue following the graduation of the class currently in training.⁸² The media continued to attack the WASP program, and scant few article appeared that defended the women who were let down by their country. These patriotic women, who lost their jobs, money and sometimes their homes for the war effort, were neglected by the popular media. Instead, articles appeared that cast a negative light on the WASPs currently in service. Articles alleged the program was created illegally and that scores of women had been killed.⁸³

The negative media slant certainly set the stage for the program's eventual disbandment. On 24 August 1944, the AAF issued a memorandum outlining the plans for disbanding the WASP program. On 1 October 1944, General Arnold ordered Cochran to "submit promptly to me your plan for such deactivation to take place not later than 20 December 1944." That same day he sent a letter to all

⁸¹ Merryman, 101.

⁸² "WASP Training Courses to End," Associated Press, 26 June 1944.

⁸³ Merryman, 108.

WASPs announcing the AAF's plans:

The WASP became part of the Air Forces because we had to explore the nation's total manpower resources and in order to release male pilots for other duties. Their very successful record of accomplishment has proved that in any future total effort the nation can count on thousands of its young women to fly any of its aircraft. You have freed male pilots for other work, but now the war situation has changed and the time has come when your volunteered services are no longer needed. The situation is that if you continue in service; you will be replacing instead of releasing our young men. I know that the WASP wouldn't want that.⁸⁴

The announcement was not well received by trainees at Avenger Air Field in Sweetwater. According to Betty Stagg Turner, "Jackie Cochran came to the field, and she announced to us that we would no longer be flying after December, that Congress had decided that they no longer needed us that the war was winding down. There was a lot of crying."⁸⁵

In a publicity event designed by the AAF, the last class of WASP trainees graduated on 7 December 1944 to coincide with the third anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Much of the AAF brass attended the event to include General Arnold himself. Arnold, perhaps in an attempt to placate the program's critics, announced at the ceremony: "You and nine hundred of your sisters have shown that you can fly wingtip to wingtip with your brothers. If there ever was a doubt in anyone's mind that women can become skillful pilots, the WASP have

⁸⁴ Arnold, Gen. H. H., Letter to Each Member of the WASP, 1 October 1944.

⁸⁵ Merryman, 116.

dispelled that doubt."⁸⁶

Ultimately the program disbanded because the public opposed it so strongly, despite the AAF's commanding general's firm support. When the war ended, no one remembered the WASPs. Hundreds of newspaper articles celebrated the return of the nation's heroes, but not a single article mentioned the contributions women pilots made to the war effort.⁸⁷ Without veteran status, the women went home unable to utilize their skills and unable to receive benefits like the GI Bill. In 1949, WASPs were offered commissions in the newly formed U.S. Air Force, yet none were offered flying assignments.⁸⁸ According to Katherine Landry Steele, "The WASP program was over; we got on with our lives, and nobody knew who we were and nobody cared, so I didn't care either."⁸⁹

Soviet Airwomen are Sent Home

Unlike American women pilots, Soviet airwomen received the same treatment as men during the war, yet their treatment after the war diverged significantly from their male counterparts. In autumn 1945, a government decree demobilized almost all women from the Soviet military and most were forced to leave very quickly. Further, the government enacted a ban of women from the

⁸⁶ Central Flying Training Command, *History of the WASP Program*, 178.

⁸⁷ Merryman, 129-130.

⁸⁸ Jean Hascall Cole, *Women Pilots of World War II*, Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1992 xix.

⁸⁹ Merryman, 130.

service academies, which effectively prohibited women from becoming either pilots or officers. It became very clear, that except in times of emergency, war was not women's work. The Soviet example demonstrates that whatever is responsible for shaping attitudes about gender and war was not affected by the successful accomplishments of female aviators during WWII.

In the last chapter, evidence supported Pennington's claim that Marina Raskova proved most responsible for the Soviets' use of female combat pilots during the war. Unlike in the rest of the military manpower shortages were not the sole factor. Both in aviation and the rest of the military, though, the use of women was meant only as a temporary measure. The publicity that the women did receive was played down as the war drew to a close. The government began once again stressing that Soviet women were first and foremost wives and mothers. Women were also workers, but the only roles they held in the military were reserved to emergency situations. Proven combat performance was not a factor in determining women's continued participation.

Pennington contributes the rapid demobilization to the pronatalist policies of the Soviet government and because women were still desperately needed in industry.⁹⁰ Women never became part of the Soviet military elite, and, further, the government attempted to erase their participation from public memory. In

⁹⁰ In 1945 when the war ended, women accounted for 63 percent of the total workforce in Moscow. Reina Pennington, "Do Not Speak of the Services You Rendered," 158-159.

the official Soviet history of the Air Force in WW II, women are only mentioned once and Raskova's contributions are merely a footnote.⁹¹

Pennington also highlights the fact that attitudes toward gendered war roles simply did not change despite the successful participation of women aviators in WWII. She illustrates this by noting the treatment they received at the front. Although they performed the same missions and flew the same planes as men, they were frequently patronized by the media and their superiors. The term *devushki-letchiki* or girl-pilots was used frequently whereas young male aviators were never referred to as boy-pilots. An article that featured the female pilots of the 46th who flew the outdated Po-2 night bombers referred to them as *Orliata* or eaglets. Men who flew the same planes were cast as aggressive falcons or eagles, not the more powerless term.⁹²

Griesse and Stites highlight the way military women and women in general were treated during the war years. "Women were rarely referred to in these wartime years by their functions alone; they were not specialists, fighters, or workers, but women-specialists, women-fighters, or women-workers."⁹³

According to Pennington there was an overwhelming emphasis placed on

⁹¹ Ray Wagner, ed., *The Soviet Air Force in World War II: The Official History* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973), 155-156.

⁹² Pennington, "Do Not Speak...", 162. The article she cites is from *Ogonek* 27 (840) (1943).

⁹³ Anne Eliot Griesse and Richard Stites, "Russia: Revolution and War," in *Female Soldiers Combatants or Noncombatants? Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. By Nancy Loring Goldman (Westport, CT.: Greenwood, 1982), 79.

playing up traditional female virtue at the front. Pictures would often show women primping near their planes with a compact mirror before a mission or sewing during preflight orientations.

The women who expected to go home from the war as heroes went home instead to face a barrage of insults for their unwomanly behavior, proving to Pennington that no one really accepted the idea of a military woman. "I went [home] as a heroine, never thinking that a girl from the front line could be received the way I was.... I came to know insults, I heard offensive words." And then there was the reaction of her new in-laws to their son's recent marriage: "Who have you got married to? An army girl. Why, you have two younger sisters. Who will marry them now?"⁹⁴

Even women veterans maintained attitudes concerning traditional gender roles, especially those that reinforced a woman's role as nurturer. Volunteer mechanic Zoya Malkova claimed that "at that time and now, my position is that war is not for women; women shouldn't participate. In a way it's against their nature, because women's first purpose is to preserve peace." Navigator Akimova reinforced this sentiment: "the very nature of a woman rejects the idea of fighting. A woman is born to give birth to children, to nurture. Flying combat missions is against our nature."⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Alexiyevich, "War's Unwomanly Face," p. 244, quoted in Pennington, 163.

⁹⁵ Anne Noggle, *A Dance with Death* (College Station: Texas A&M university Press, 1994), 217, 147.

The final part of Pennington's argument rests on the actions of the Soviet government itself. The government was making arrangements for the complete dismissal of female veterans even before the war ended. The reasons typically given to women to keep them out of the service usually were medical. An interesting example of this occurred in March 1945 when the commander of the 46th Guards decided to send two of his most qualified pilots and winners of the HSU, Ekaterina Riabova and Maria Smirnova, to the Zhukovsky Military Aviation Academy. Once there, the academy's commanding general told them:

You are real heroes of our Motherland. You have already proved what Soviet women are capable of when their help is essential. But the conditions of study in a military academy take a heavy toll on the female body. You lost a lot of strength and health in the war. We must protect you. Enroll to study in civilian university instead.⁹⁶

Pennington found no evidence that male veteran pilots had their health questioned upon enrolling in the Academy.

Major Alexander Gridnev, who became the second commander of the 586th Fighter Aviation Regiment in October 1942, claims the government enacted an even more gruesome plan to rid the military of women pilots. He believed high officials sent women fighter pilots into the most hostile territory and on the most dangerous missions in order to hasten their deaths. According to a personal interview Pennington conducted with him in May 1993, Gridnev said: "I understood then, and so I understand now, they already had a plan to destroy

⁹⁶ Pennington, "Do Not Speak...", 168.

them."⁹⁷

Finally, Pennington cites the importance the Soviet government placed on women's labor at the end of the war. Unlike in the United States, where women left the workforce in great numbers to allow returning servicemen to assume their positions, more Soviet women than ever were working to rebuild a devastated country. As mentioned in the last chapter, Stalin hardly acknowledged Soviet military women and in a July 1945 speech, President Kalinin said to a group of recently demobilized women soldiers:

Apart from everything else, there is one more thing you have done. Equality for women has existed in our country since the very first day of the October Revolution. But you have won equality for women in yet another sphere: in the defense of your country arms in hand. You have won equal rights for women in a field in which they hitherto have not taken such a direct part. But allow me, as one grown wise with years, to say to you: do not give yourself airs in your future practical work. Do not speak of the services you rendered, let others do it for you. That will be better.⁹⁸

By claiming that women had won equal rights, one could assume that this included military service; however, in the same breath Kalinin urged women to forget about their military past. In this speech and in this part of Pennington's argument, one can find the heart of what makes the Soviet Union different and why women were allowed to fly and why they were dismissed so hastily. It lies in the contradictions between the promises socialism offered to women and the

⁹⁷ Ibid., 169.

⁹⁸ M.I. Kalinin, *On Communist Education: Selected Speeches and Articles* (Moscow, 1953), p. 428, quoted in Pennington, "Do Not Speak..." 170.

realities of women's lives.

From 1917 onward, the government promised women equality and made several attempts at keeping that promise. Following Marxist doctrine, the government attempted to relieve women of the bonds of family life that prohibited them from becoming full, equal participants in society. However, by the late 1920s, the government was making a shift that Barbara Evens Clements claims was part of a larger retreat from all aspects of Marxist utopianism. Not only was the state not disappearing as Marx had predicted, but neither was the family and both had become cornerstones of Soviet life. The "new Soviet woman" was urged to cultivate her femininity in the 1930s. Legally, women continued to have rights equal with men, but they were also to continue their traditional roles as devoted wives and mothers.⁹⁹

Women, the government claimed, had achieved equality with men, but they still occupied the most powerless positions in society. Women could work as hard as men, but they still needed to perform their duties as wives and mothers. Military aviation was just that, hard work. Unlike in the United States, women flyers were not flying the best planes and receiving the best assignments. In the case of the 46th, they received the worst planes and had the toughest

⁹⁹ Barbara Evans Clements, "Later Developments: Trends in Soviet Women's History, 1930 to the Present." In *Russia's Women: Accommodation, Resistance, Transformation*, eds. Barbara Evans Clements, Barbara Alpern Engle and Christine D. Worobec. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, 268-269.

assignments.

When the war ended, women could continue to perform strenuous jobs like mining, but that is because that is where they were needed. There were not enough men to fill all of the traditionally male positions in the labor force. Women were no longer needed in military aviation or in the military period. According to Griesse and Stites "combat experience had not been for Soviet women a path leading to greater recognition and equality in the public male sphere, but rather a stopgap measure used by a desperate regime pushed to its ultimate resource, which it did not hesitate to exploit."¹⁰⁰

The WWII experience has implications for military women today, but not as one might expect. The war, in fact, did little to increase opportunities for women in the military. For men, military service is considered an obligation, whereas for women, it is an opportunity assuming one meets the appropriate qualifications. Their training and recruitment today are still in large measure simply a backup tool in case their service is needed.

Considering the way both governments treated these two groups of women pilots at the war's conclusion, it becomes interesting to discover how the women kept their memories and history alive. As already noted, American women faced an onslaught of negative media coverage and Soviet women were told not to speak of the services they rendered. Yet, to some extent both groups

¹⁰⁰ Griesse and Stites, 79.

have survived in history and are increasingly becoming the subjects of scholarly work.

The WASPs' Postwar Struggle for Militarization

The postwar fight for WASP militarization came at a time when America was focused on returning servicemen and victory. This completely contradicted with the accusations women made that their government had let them down. The media instead wanted to highlight women's return to their traditional roles and not a single congressional representatives wanted to sponsor a bill that supported the WASPs. Despite fighting an uphill battle, many of these women stuck together and continued to press for veteran's status.¹⁰¹

The corps of these women remained organized through the Order of the Finfella, a WASP service organization formed after their disbandment in 1944. The group named the organization after the WASP's insignia character and formed it for the purposes of informing WASPs of employment opportunities and to continue the fight for reinstatement in the armed forces.¹⁰²

The Order of the Finfella made its first attempt at official legislation by approaching Representative Edith Nourse Rogers, Chair of the Veterans Affairs Committee of the House, in 1947. They crafted the resolution to provide full veterans' benefits for all WASPs who had completed the program in good

¹⁰¹ Merryman, 131.

¹⁰² Ibid.

standing and for the next of kin of WASPs who had died in the line of duty. Ultimately, the resolution did not receive enough support for introduction into Congress.¹⁰³

The following year, Congress introduced Senate Bill 1641 "to establish the Women's Army Corps into the Regular Army, to authorize the enlistment and appointment of women in the Regular Navy and Marine Corps and the Naval and Marine Corps Reserve."¹⁰⁴ The military had been satisfied with the performance of women during WW II and now wanted to provide a permanent regular component of women in the peacetime military. The Senate easily passed the bill, but many members of the House wanted a compromise that only allowed women in the Reserves. Many Representatives believed that differences existed between men and women that would cause problems if women were allowed to serve permanently on active duty.

The 1948 House debate focused on the propriety of women serving in the regular Army. The attitudes in Congress reflected that of all of America at the time. Simply put, when the nation was at war, women could mobilize in almost any capacity, just as men, but a return to peace meant that women had to return to their peacetime roles. Those roles did not include women in the regular army. The disadvantage these members had, though, was that they could not argue

¹⁰³ Ibid., 131-132.

¹⁰⁴ Congressional Record-House, 21 April 1948, 4806.

that women were incapable of military service. The women who served in WW II in all branches of the military had proven themselves, and their records reflected that. According to Representative William Miller (CN),

Certainly they have demonstrated during the war period and in the months and years since the shooting war ended that there is a place for them in the armed forces, that they can do a job fully as well as any male soldier can do it, and in certain positions and categories, particularly in hospitals, they can do their job better than any man can do it for them.¹⁰⁵

Because of this admirable service and performance by women, some Congressmen couched their arguments against the women in a laudatory way. According to Representative Adolph Sabath (IL),

Personally, I am satisfied that the women have served the country well, but that was during the war. I feel now that the war is over-and I hope there is no danger of another war-that it will not be necessary to expand the women's branches of the armed services.¹⁰⁶

By 1948, the campaign for the WASPs and women in the military in general had significantly swayed Congressional attitudes. Women's service records had successfully disproved erroneous assumptions about WAC and WASP immorality. The opposition could no longer make its case. In fact, the mood had changed to the point that now Congress itself was condemned for the way it had treated women during the war years.¹⁰⁷ Representative Wadsworth began the debate on the Women's Armed Services Reserve Bill as such:

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 4808.

¹⁰⁷ Merryman, 134.

Just a word about the measure itself and perhaps its origin. I am sure a great many of you will remember the discussions which took place back in 1942 and 1943, while we were at war, with respect to the admission of women to the military services of the United States. I can remember very well at that time there were a good many cynical remarks made, some were very unkind remarks, with respect to the ability of women to serve faithfully and efficiently in the armed forces.¹⁰⁸

Despite limitations, the bill passed on 21 April 1948 allowing women entrance into the regular military branches in a permanent capacity.¹⁰⁹ At this time, the House measure allowed for the possible integration of WASPs into the regular Air Force, which in 1947 had become a separate military branch. The Air Force, though, had no intention of utilizing WASPs or any women pilots for that matter. Instead, the Air Force integrated former WASPs into the Women's Air Force (WAF), but as nonflying officers. Setbacks continued. Only women with WW II service could be appointed and they had to be appointed as brand new second lieutenants since they did not officially serve in the war on active duty.

About three hundred former WASPs joined the WAF including pioneers Jacquelyn Cochran and Nancy Harkness Love. Four years after their disbandment, the WASPs were finally given an opportunity to serve in the Air Force, but only in the Reserves and not as pilots. The former WASPs who did not join still did not have the military recognition or compensation that they deserved and women were still unable to fly in the U.S. military. It would be

¹⁰⁸ Congressional Record-House, 21 April 1948, 4806.

another thirty years before the WASPs would receive the militarization they had been fighting for.¹¹⁰

Unfortunate for the WASPs that did not join the WAF, many lost touch with each other in the years that would follow. In 1960, one former WASP, Marty Wyall began to assemble addresses of former classmates and other WASPs and organized the group's first reunion. The second reunion, held in 1969, received greater attendance as many WASPs had heard about the first and contacted Wyall themselves. This reunion was the first time many former WASPs had heard about the reasons for their disbandment, since those who did know had been forbidden from discussing what they knew. As the reunions continued, more and more WASPs participated and militarization became a central issue.¹¹¹

At the 1972 reunion, the women formed the their first national organization to obtain militarization, the WASP Military Committee. The committee named retired Air Force Colonel Bruce Arnold, the son of deceased Army Air Forces Commanding General Henry H. Arnold as its chair. Because of the committee's efforts, WASP militarization bills were introduced into both the House and the Senate. Neither bill, however, made it past their respective

¹⁰⁹ The measure placed a 2 percent cap on the number of women allowed to serve in the military, Merryman, 135.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 136.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 136-137.

military affairs committees.¹¹²

To add insult to injury, the Air Force announced in 1976 it would for the first time allow women pilots to enter the Air Force Academy and to serve as pilots. The first women pilots graduated in September 1977 and the media surrounding them claimed that they were the first to pilot US military planes.¹¹³ Although many WASPs were upset by the positive attention, these "first women pilots" were receiving, they recognized they had an opening with the media that they so desperately needed. According to Katherine Landry Steele:

When the Air Force Academy decided they were going to take women, and they made the announcement that for the first time in history women were going to fly military aircraft, it really set a bomb under all of us. I thought: Come on, after all we put into that program, and all of the –I won't say sacrifices, because it wasn't really much of a sacrifice, but it certainly was a big effort, and we did a very, very good job. So I then decided that we all had to get behind our militarization.¹¹⁴

The WASPs took advantage of this new media angle. The connection was made between the achievements of the WASPs and this new breed of female pilot. For the first time, the WASPs could tell their complete stories. They could tell how they served their country honorably and well and how that same country let them down once the war came to its conclusion. A far cry from 1943 and 1944, headlines about the WASPs now read: "The WASPs: Maybe They'll

¹¹² Ibid., 137.

¹¹³ Ibid., 138.

¹¹⁴ Quoted in Merryman, 138.

Get More, But All They Want Is Recognition"¹¹⁵ and "World War II's Women Pilots Feel Forgotten, Their Benefits Ignored."¹¹⁶ The mood had completely shifted according to Merryman, "In the 1940s, the media was incredulous that the WASPs would demand or expect veterans' benefits; by 1977, the media was incredulous that they had not received these benefits."¹¹⁷

Even with all of this public support, the WASPs still had their opponents in the likes of the American Legion, the Veterans' Administration, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and even President Jimmy Carter.¹¹⁸ A big break came for the WASPs when *The Stars and Stripes*, the only national veterans' newspaper allowed the WASPs a weekly column to voice their justification for militarization. Once one veterans' group supported the WASPs others started to follow.¹¹⁹

The major obstacle the most recent WASP legislation faced rested on proving that the AAF actually intended to militarized the WASPs and had not merely intended to keep it a civil service program. Those who opposed WASP legislation argued that the women received civil service benefits and that their jobs were no different than other civil institutions that performed during the war. Leading the opposition was Dorothy Starbuck, the first woman to head the benefits division of the Veterans' Administration:

¹¹⁵ "The WASPs: Maybe They'll Get More, But All They Want Is Recognition," Dayton Daily News, 15 May 1977.

¹¹⁶ "World War II's Women Pilots Feel Forgotten, Their Benefits Ignored," *Baltimore Evening Sun*, 14 October 1976.

¹¹⁷ Merryman, 139.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 140.

Whatever similarities to military service the employment of these civilians bore, fundamental distinctions remained. As civil servants they were eligible for Federal Employees Compensation for job-related injuries, and in the event of death their surviving spouses and children became eligible for death benefits under this same program.¹²⁰

This was simply untrue. In fact, precisely because the AAF did intend to militarize the WASPs, the program was never given civil service standing. To prove their military standing, the WASPs' lobby provided dozens of declassified documents that stressed the program's military regimentation, the use of AAF equipment, and military customs and courtesies. The women pilots were on military orders, they were not free to come and go as they pleased, and they were issued identification cards and Army Instrument Pilot Certificates that WASPs were required to carry while on flight duty.¹²¹

After a more than thirty-year struggle on 19 October 1977, the Senate unanimously voted to add an amendment calling WASP veterans' recognition to the GI Improvement Act and on 3 November the House voted for passage of WASP veterans' status. The next day the Senate approved provisions that recognized WASPs' service as active military duty and provided for honorable discharges with full veterans' benefits.¹²² "We were finally recognized for what

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 141.

¹²⁰ "Administration Opposes WASPs Bill," *Stars and Stripes*, 2 June 1977.

¹²¹ Byrd Howell Granger, *Evidence Supporting Military Service by Women Airforce Service Pilots of World War II*, 1977, 3.

¹²² Merryman, 156.

we had done thirty years before," said Nadine Nagle. When it was finally passed, then I finally went to a reunion," said Kaddy Steele.¹²³

Soviet Women Struggle on Another Front

Information on post-war female Soviet fliers is much harder to come by. According to Pennington, there is no authoritative documentary source. In fact, in her decade-long study, Pennington has only been able to acquire data on seventy-seven women veterans of aviation and only twenty-eight of those are pilots.¹²⁴ As already mentioned, almost all women were forced from the military following the war, and the government banned them from service academies thereby denying the only viable option to becoming a pilot after the war.

The women did not form lobbies or press for legislation; for the most part they went back to the work they were doing before the war and tried to rebuild Soviet society. What they did do, however, was write memoirs and compile unit histories and maintain unit photo albums. Their history has only recently been uncovered and can greatly be attributed to the authors who have shown them so much interest. Most notably among them is Kazimiera Jean Cottam, a Canadian researcher and defense analyst (recently retired). Since the early 1980s, Cottam has been publishing on Soviet military women in combat and translating Soviet

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Pennington, 144.

memoirs into English.¹²⁵ Other Western scholars like the ones cited extensively in this book have also helped to shed new light on this particular group of heroines. Anne Noggle, a WASP herself, interviewed nearly seventy veterans of the Soviet combat regiments and published *A Dance with Death* in 1994. Her account is valuable for its documentary evidence, but it is still not a cohesive history of the women's regiments.

Reina Pennington, whose work has been invaluable here, attended a reunion of the Soviet female veterans in May 1993. The women can now speak freely about their experiences and share them with interested outsiders. However, following the war and the throughout the Cold War, they did not have that luxury.

Conclusion

The women of the WASP program had issues to contend with that Soviet airwomen did not. First, WASPs were not in the military; they were a civilian service organization. Their first battle was one of militarization; the second was a continued existence in the military. Both battles were lost by the time the Allies won WW II. The second major obstacle American airwoman had to contend with was the desirability of their positions. WASPs encountered danger on a daily basis, yet not the same type of danger combat pilots faced over enemy

¹²⁵ Ibid., 220.

territory. The WASP missions, although difficult, were preferred by men who would otherwise be conscripted into infantry duty. Their ultimate demise, therefore, was largely the result of a negative publicity campaign forged and won by the men who felt jealous and threatened by the positions the WASPs held.

Soviet airwomen, on the other hand, flew missions every bit as dangerous as their male counterparts. Their jobs were not desirable and their positions were not coveted. Although it remains true that as the war came to a close and fewer military personnel were needed across the board, there could have been a place for women in Soviet aviation. Soviet pronatalist policies, though, ensured women transitioned rapidly out of military aviation and back to their homes and factories. Women's successful participation in the war did not alter Soviet society's ideas about proper gender roles. The real threat of annihilation allowed for a temporary adjustment of those roles, but once the threat was reduced, "proper" roles resumed.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

In 1977, Congress finally acknowledged that WASPs had indeed been military personnel. The government declared them veterans and issued them honorary discharges. President Carter signed the bill into law on 23 November "officially declaring the Women's Airforce Service Pilots as having served on active duty in the Armed Forces for the United States for the purposes of laws administered by the Veteran Administration."¹²⁶ The WASPs' battle for recognition, fought for over thirty years, had finally been won.

The study of the WASPs' disbandment is important because it reveals more than just the history of these pioneering women in WWII. This study reveals that decisions about women in the military are made because of ignorance and fear rather than actual performance or necessity. In 1993, the Secretary of Defense lifted the ban on women pilots in combat. Almost ten years later, the Air Force counted 462 active duty female pilots, 15 in bombers and 47 in fighters. The numbers are not dramatic, as women only account for 3.7

¹²⁶ Merryman, 156.

percent of all Air Force pilots.¹²⁷ They do, however, fly combat missions over Iraq and Afghanistan and receive the same treatment as their male counterparts. Without the accomplishments of the WASPs in WWII and their subsequent fight for recognition, this progress would certainly have been harder to come by.

In the Soviet Union, however, little has changed since Marina Raskova and her followers broke traditional gender boundaries. Today, women are unwelcome in pilot positions in the Russian Air Force. The military, once again facing a manpower crisis, does rely heavily on women to ease the shortage and women do serve in combat positions. Many served in the Soviet war with Afghanistan, yet they hold very few senior positions. In 1997, only one woman had attained the rank of one-star general. Most continue to work in jobs that are considered feminine, such as clerical and medical. The bottom line remains that women are considered a temporary solution to a current problem. Just like the female aviators of WWII, their services are used only when necessary. Until the military academies open to women and women achieve equal rank, men will continue to make the decisions.¹²⁸

Throughout this study, I referred to the female Soviet aviators as women's units or regiments, yet that is exactly what they were not. Unlike the WASPs, these female units, whether mixed or segregated, held no special designation and

¹²⁷ Rebecca Grant, "The Quiet Pioneers," *Air Force Magazine*, 85: (December 2002), 12.

¹²⁸ Dale R. Herspring, "Women in the Russian Military: A Reluctant Marriage," *Minerva Quarterly Report on Women and the Military*, 15, No. 2 (Spring 1997), 42-59.

they were not auxiliaries. They were part of the Red Army. They wore the same uniforms and performed the same missions as men. They were the same in every respect except in the way they were treated upon the war's conclusion. The use of Soviet women in WW II is the only example of the large-scale use of women in combat in an international conventional war and, until very recently, the only example of using women in combat aviation.

The Soviet system was unique. It faced manpower shortages and the threat of foreign occupation, like other WW II belligerents; however, the Soviets relaxed traditional gender norms that others did not. What is not unique is the impact women's service had on those gender norms. Even though the women performed bravely and successfully, their accomplishments did little to alter the traditional gender roles. Upon the war's completion, little room existed for women to continue service in the military and most were expected to resume their traditional roles as wives, mothers, and workers. Rebuilding Mother Russia was much more important than defending it.

The postwar women of the Soviet Union faced the same "double burden" as women did decades before. They were told they had achieved equality with men, but at the same time they were encouraged to get back to working and mothering. They could work equally hard as men, but there was little chance that they would ever rise to positions of power in the military or in the civilian sector. Like the women of the United States, their labor was exploited, but not

just in the factories or on the farms. Soviet women's labor was exploited in the skies over the Eastern front as well.

During WWII, both the US and the Soviet Union were patriarchal societies. No matter how well women performed in the skies, the real battle was fought over cultural values. If the women of this study had only one thing in common, it was that neither of their cultures were ready to accept women into permanent roles as military aviators. Both countries allowed women to perform that duty temporarily and both dismissed women from that role for two different gender-defined reasons. The commonality rests with the fact that both societies wanted a return to prewar standards where women did not hold positions desired by men and where they were responsible for the home and family.

The fate of the WASPs was much more affected by outside forces than was the fate of the Soviet airwomen. The male civilian pilot's lobby and the media directly led to the disbandment of the program, whereas in the Soviet case, termination related more directly to the end of the war. Both groups of women confronted societal gender norms head on. In the US case, women did so by acquiring jobs desired by men. In the Soviet case, women flew in combat, an activity that until WWII had been completely defined as masculine.

Those outside forces are exactly what has helped American women progress to the point where they are today. Lobby groups and the media were two key components in both 1944 and 1977. In 1944, they ensured that women pilots were forced from the jobs that men desired. In 1977, they helped women

achieve the benefits and recognition that they deserved. Until Russia develops the kind of effective interest groups committed to broadening women's access to higher military positions, women will continue to occupy only the lowest rungs of the military ladder.

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